

Book reviews

Hetsroni, Amir (Ed.) (2011). *Reality television: Merging the global and the local*. New York: Nova Science Publishers. 295 pp.

In the last twenty years or so, reality television has become an ungraspable oxymoronic label covering a wide array of hybrid, factual-based genres, ranging from reality shows to docusoaps and mock-documentaries. Whereas at first, reality television was often associated with trash, and series like *Big Brother* raised wide public controversy, the phenomenon soon occupied a place at the forefront of contemporary television culture. Besides questions on defining the (meta-)genre and analyzing controversial programs, research now also deals with issues of production, programming and reception. The boost in research on reality television is partly due to its amazing audience success, of course, but the phenomenon appeared to be interesting also in raising fundamental questions on contemporary (media) ethics, social values, participation, and implications of the shift between the private and public sphere.

One of the strong features of *Reality television: Merging the global and the local* is that it is, to some extent, an interesting showcase of the various approaches to reality television research today. In the volume, edited by Amir Hetsroni from the Ariel University Center in Israel, we find examples of textual analysis (e.g., Sevilay Celenk's contribution on the Turkish version of *Pop Idol*), discourse analysis (Oren Livio's piece on 'commercial nationalism' or the representation of the nation in four versions of *Pop Idol*, in the USA, the UK, Canada and Israel), programming analysis (e.g., a chapter by Maria Raicheva-Stover on *Big Brother* in post-communist Bulgaria), audience survey research (e.g., an interesting chapter by Helena Bilandzic and Matthias R. Hastall on how people in Germany talk about morally disputable issues in relation to *Big Brother*), participants surveys (Erich M. Hayes' and Norah E. Dunbar's contribution about participants' voting patterns for *Survivor*), and public criticism/debate analysis (Hetsroni's chapter on reality television in Israel).

Recognizing that *Reality television: Merging the global and the local* might look like "just another collection of essays about reality TV", the editor tries to indicate the volume's contribution to the debate. In his introduction, Hetsroni criticizes most other volumes as "too general in their approach", while he argues that the contributions in his book "admittedly avoid one million dollar questions such as 'what is reality TV all about' [... or the] characteristics of reality TV" (p. 1). Hetsroni's answer to this kind of catch-all questions is that "to me ... above all reality TV is a primitive concept, which means that we know it when we see it, but it is difficult to write down a definition upon which the

scientific community and the public agree” (p. 1). Apart from the frivolity with which any attempt to define reality television is set aside (along with some of the strongest and most inspiring literature on the phenomenon), one might raise the question what is the object under investigation. Most of the cases in the volume are well-known, ‘undisputable’ examples of reality television like *Big Brother*, *Survivor* or *Pop Idol*, but one wonders, for instance, to what degree the worldwide success and diffusion of the reality television phenomenon fostered new formats, subgenres, styles and issues.

This question (which remains unanswered) is important for this volume because its key focus precisely is on, as Hetsroni indicates, a “culturally sensitive examination and a cross-cultural view – things [...] clearly missing in the literature” (p. 2). This cross-cultural view is exemplified in various cross-national case studies on audiences’ engagement in different countries, or on the adaptation process of formats (e.g., Livio’s and Celenk’s chapters; Jürgen Grimm’s comparative content analysis of the *Supernanny* format in England, Germany, Austria, Spain and Brazil). A key item, which is raised in most debates on cross-cultural (in this volume mainly cross-national) adaptation, is the reality television format’s ability to transcend transnational borders. This issue of textual openness and adaptability has been well-documented, for instance, in the work done by Albert Moran, along with the encoding or re-inscription of nationalism, national identity and traditional values in the adapted version. This analysis is strongly present in this book, although in a couple of case studies some new light is shed on the issue. This is, for instance, the case with Zala Volcic’s and Mark Andrejevic’s analysis of a locally conceived popular Slovenian reality format, *The Farm*, which outperformed all competitors including locally produced versions of *The Bachelor*, *Big Brother* and *Who wants to be a millionaire*. In their analysis, Volcic and Andrejevic stress how the program directly tapped into the country’s self-identification with its rural, agricultural history.

Reality television: Merging the global and the local is not the first book on reality television and it will certainly not be the last and most original one, although it contains some interesting contributions which underline the necessity to look more closely at cross-cultural differences. Two final critical remarks, though, have to be made. First of all, although the cross-national focus in the volume is said to be organized, as the sections’ headings indicate, around North America, Europe and the Middle East, the last one is mainly defined as Israel (apart from one contribution on Turkey). Secondly, it is sad to say but on many occasions the volume is marred by slack copy-editing (e.g., inconsequent use of words like reality television). The contributors really deserved better.

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Hansen, A. (2010). *Environment, media and communication*. London & New York: Routledge. 235 pp.

Media and communication processes are central to how environmental problems, from climate change to natural disasters, are defined, contested, addressed and responded to. *Environment, media and communication* by Anders Hansen, published in 2010 as a part of Routledge's Introductions to Environment Series, provides an excellent introduction to the central role played by various media outlets in shaping public debate and understanding concerning the environment. This is illustrated in seven chapters which assemble work encompassing not just a focus on news reporting, but also a wider range of communication outlets such as wildlife documentaries, science-fiction films and advertisements. The author, Anders Hansen, is one of the leading voices in environmental communication research as Chair of the IAMCR Working Group on Environment, Science and Risk Communication. In addition to the earlier *The mass media and environmental issues* (Leicester University Press: 1993), he is also the author of *Mass communication research methods* (Palgrave Macmillan: 1998) and *Media and communication research* (Basingstoke: 2009).

In the first section of the book, Hansen introduces the main arguments and elaborates his constructionist perspective, which examines how environmental issues only emerge and remain as issues for public concern and political decision-making through communication processes. The second section of the book moves to claims-making activities, strategies and the power of key actors in environmental debate and controversy. He argues that environmental news is the result of the interaction between claims-making activities of societal actors, on the one hand, and the roles and professional values of journalists, organizational arrangements, news values and professional practices, on the other. In the third section, Hansen elaborates his argument that certain environmental problems resonate more easily than others with common cultural narratives or preoccupations, across a range of media forms. These cultural narratives are reflected in images of science, nature and the environment and have shaped ideological interpretations of nature and the environment, including changing dominant paradigms of nature as either an object of control and exploitation, or as something to be protected. In the final chapter and section of the book, Hansen reviews the major frameworks aimed at understanding how media influence and interact with public opinion and political decision-making on environmental issues. He proposes a 'circulation of claims' perspective in contradistinction to traditional linear models of communication, which suggests a Hegelian dialectical communication system where claims inevitably generate counterclaims, which then synthesize into new claims, provoking new counterclaims, so on and so forth.

The book is informative, accessibly written and likely to be not only useful for junior and senior students of social and environmental sciences, but to anyone who wishes to examine the role of media and communication processes in shaping environmental problems. Central arguments are repeated in the first chapter and at the beginning and end of each chapter, which provides the book with a clear focus. The book aims to be an introduction rather than an all-inclusive standard work; nevertheless, it succeeds in addressing a wide variety of themes, ideas and research. Hansen has chosen to include research on popular culture, which makes *Environment, media and communication* an original contribution to the field, complementary with recently published books such as *Media and environment* (Polity Press, 2010) by Libby Lester and *Climate Change and the Media* (Peter Lang, 2009) by Tammy Boyce and Justin Lewis, which mainly focus on news media.

It is difficult to fault Hansen's book, as his arguments are strong and clear. It is rather unfortunate, however, that he does not explore the 'circulation of claims' perspective, which now resides at the end of the book, more thoroughly. This way, it leaves the reader guessing how the 'claims-making activities' of actors can result in a 'democratic' synthesis, as many claims-makers suffer from cumulative injustices in societies dominated by structural inequalities. According to Hansen, successful claims-making does not require alternative frames alongside dominant frames, but is often more effectively done by engaging with dominant interpretive packages through subtle acts of rhetorical re-definition or re-framing. This could be a strategy for successful claims-making, but at the same time environmental problems are potentially depoliticized and emptied of their political content.

A further point of criticism concerns the cultural narratives, which are taken as a given in the book. Some elaboration on the origin(s) of these narratives and how they relate to political meta-narratives and shifts to post materialist values would have been welcome. Furthermore, inspiration might have been drawn from research in Asia, Africa and Latin America to know whether the 'Promethean' or 'romantic' paradigms that are described in the book are also applicable in developing countries. For example, natural disasters such as "The Great Floods of 2010" in Pakistan, were interpreted as a punishment for sins by a large part of the Pakistani population. This explanation does not adequately fit on the continuum between 'control' or 'protection'.

Overall, these are rather minor points, which do not detract from the overall quality of the book, which is recommended to the readers of this journal.

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Poels, K., & Malliet, S. (Eds.) (2011). *Vice city virtue: Moral issues in digital game play*. Leuven: Acco. 352 pp.

There is perhaps no more hotly contested issue regarding video games than the effect of violence on the emotional lives of our youth and, by extension, of all members of society. Parents, educators, and politicians are justifiably concerned about the effects of media violence on the thoughts and actions of those who are exposed to it. In the rush to answer questions about violence and games, however, it may be too easy to overlook the role that previous theory and research traditions can play. Video games may be a recent medium, but the mechanisms by which they can effect changes in thought and behavior are likely rooted in existing theory. That is the real question we should be asking: Which existing theoretical traditions can help to explain not just if, but how a medium like video games can change thoughts and beliefs? One of the implications of asking that question is that we must adopt a value-free stance. It is valid to ask whether violent video games can increase violence in the real world, but such questions are only one piece of the puzzle.

Violence, after all, is itself neither good nor bad; what matters are the context and consequences. If I kill someone during a ‘justified’ war, in self-defense, or to save the life of someone who is being attacked unjustly, that is a qualitatively different act than if I kill someone in anger or to steal from them. Unjustified violence is a form of amoral behavior, while justified violence *can* be a form of moral behavior. We have been studying morality (individual reflection on what is right within a given cultural context) and ethics (philosophical reflection on morals/morality) for many, many years.

That is precisely the subject of Karolien Poels and Steven Malliet’s new edited text, *Vice city virtue: Moral issues in digital game play*. As described in chapter 1, the authors recognizing that “morality in digital games is being studied from several disciplines” (p. 22), they solicited contributions from and synthesized from multiple perspectives to establish author guidelines and organizational principles for the book. For example, they correctly identify that current, successful morality and games research approaches are adopting a “player-centered” focus. One cannot understand how people are influenced (or not) by video games without understanding how they interact with those media, and the chapters in this text therefore adopt a player-centric view, albeit to different degrees. The editors also achieve interdisciplinary synthesis through their process for the book. For example, contributors read blind copies of each other’s work, both for review and to inform their own perspectives.

The organization of the text further reflects the depth and breadth of the editors’ knowledge of the territory. The text is divided into four parts. *Part 1*,

Philosophical Approaches (understanding morality from the tradition of philosophy), and *Part 2, Feeling, Judging, Acting (understanding morality as a psychological phenomenon)*, focus on theoretical approaches to the study of morality while there are dozens of different theoretical approaches, these two traditions comprise a significant majority of the varied approaches to studying morality and are critical for those looking to study and understand morality and media. Together, these two parts effectively set the context for the chapters that follow, and while space does not allow a description of every chapter in the book, those in Parts 1 and 2 are worth individual description and analysis to illustrate the breadth of theoretical approaches brought to bear throughout the text.

I will discuss the chapters within Parts 1 and 2 before addressing Parts 3 and 4.

Chapter 2 is an excellent overview of the larger tradition of moral and ethical studies (irrespective of games), which the author, Kathleen Gabriels, then situates within the unique context of virtual spaces. Gabriels effectively establishes the conceptual framework for discussing morality and virtual spaces in the broadest sense, and this helps to frame the more specific theoretical interpretations in the following chapters.

In chapter 3, Marcus Schulzke suggests trying to balance the actual psychological harm that can occur in virtual spaces with the fact that such spaces are not the real world: “As long as violence is only done to NPCs (nonplayer characters) or to avatars controlled by people who willingly risk their virtual lives and property, in-game actions cannot be considered immoral” (p. 52). Secondly, the author argues that even when actions in a game are amoral, we cannot immediately conclude that they are bad or have negative consequences. He ties amoral behavior in video games to the tradition of thought experiments, where people are asked to commit (virtually or in thought) amoral actions and are then interviewed about their feelings in order to better understand human behavior. The amoral action, in such cases, serves a purpose for good, since no person was actually harmed, and the knowledge gained ultimately helps a large number of people. In such instances, the action is separate from the *judgment* about the action and is subjective and context-dependent.

Charlene Burns, in chapter 4, examines morality and virtual spaces from a theological ethics point of view, arguing that “at least some types of games might be good for the soul” (p. 71). This is an important perspective to include, given the concern by many that video games may threaten moral character development. Again, it does not show that people should not be worried about video games, but that in order to understand how games may have ‘negative’ consequences, we must first understand the mechanisms by which thoughts

and behavior are changed, regardless of whether those changes are for good or ill.

In chapter 5, Mark Coeckelbergh focuses more specifically on the issue of violence in video games, and provides theoretical evidence for the mechanisms by which violent video games may indeed be harmful. He argues that because players know games are not “real” they cognitively disengage during play and stop judging whether actions are “right” or “wrong”. More than just a lack of practice in making moral choices, he argues, this disengagement actually encourages the habit of not considering the morality of one’s choices. Whether one is playing a violent game or not, this failure to regularly consider the consequences and moral status of actions taken during the game is potentially harmful to one’s ability for moral reasoning in life.

Part 3, Moral Perceptions, focuses on understanding how society perceives issues of morality. This provides a good balance for the theoretical focus of Part 1, and perspectives from the public, parents, and players of games help to illustrate how games are perceived by different stakeholders. This makes the text more accessible to mainstream readers, yet also helps them see how the issues raised in the first two sections have relevance in applied research settings. Likewise, the fourth section, *Moral Content of Digital Games*, comprises case studies of how individual games can, through the application of theory covered in the earlier sections, effect psychosocial affective changes in players. This is a key section also, as it not only helps to apply theory to practice, but further allows those who are perhaps not game players to experience these ideas within the context of game play.

Garry Young and Monica Whitty in chapter 6 use the concept of taboos to explain why we have such visceral reactions to even simulated immoral actions and to explore whether we can or should be able to get past these visceral reactions when considering the morality of a game. It is a powerful argument, although one which may not win many mainstream converts (taboos are deeply rooted in our mental reasoning models, and we are loath to accept violations for any reason). In chapter 7, Tilo Hartmann argues that players can either experience a game in an experiential, automatic mode that produces visceral reactions to amoral or violent behavior (related to Young and Witty’s concept of taboos) or in a rational or reflective mode in which they actively process what is happening (which might seem to argue against Coeckelbergh’s argument regarding cognitive disengagement in chapter 5).

With chapter 8, the book begins to shift more toward empirical studies based, of course, on the theoretical framework outlined in the first half of the book. The practical applications of theory in the following chapters serve as models for future research on morality and games. For example, in chapter 8,

Konjin, van der Molen, and Hoorn reason that if players' attitudes toward aggression are in part the result of identifying with a violent game hero, then increasing empathy for the victim might ameliorate aggressive responses (something that would also be useful for studying disengagement or reflective modes as raised in earlier chapters). In chapter 9, Ribbens, Poels, and Lamotte set out to determine if cheating in games is different to cheating in general, which has been studied extensively, and whether the framework they propose can account for this kind of behavior.

The other chapters likewise make significant contributions to the text, continuing to ground theory in practice and research. Chapter 11, in which Gary Schott on having parents play *Grand Theft Auto* (GTA), is a must-read for non-gaming parents. Likewise, chapter 12 (authored by the editors and Tom Thysen) is an excellent example of applied theoretical research on the persuasive mechanisms of games, using, in this case, *GTA* and *America's Army*. Part 4 extends the process of instantiating theory in real-world practice by examining four different games as cases for applying different theoretical perspectives on morality. Since many mainstream readers may be nongamers, there is particular value in seeing the games described in this fashion, and the authors collectively do an excellent job of deconstructing gameplay.

Mainstream readers may be surprised to find that none of the authors actually argues that games cannot cause harm or that concern over morality and games is unwarranted. Rather, they argue that amoral actions are contextual and that games have an equally strong potential for good or bad moral consequences in the real world. What is needed, according to the editors and authors, is a more nuanced, informed approach to studying the issues of morality and ethics in virtual spaces, drawing from the rich body of research and theories in the past. The mechanisms by which morality can be instantiated, be studied, and impact humans during game play are what is most important and are why the editors of this volume rightly sought out multidisciplinary, theoretically driven, player-centric analyses of morality and games.

In the final analysis, this book does an excellent job of balancing depth with breadth and academic versus mainstream audiences. The content is an effective mix of multiple disciplines, theoretical traditions, and applied research. As such, it serves as an excellent introduction to current and future study of morality in games, which must, as the editors say, focus on player-centric analyses of the mechanisms by which games can influence morality. For scholars, it serves as a good primer on the theoretical issues and a model for the kind of research that must be done. For mainstream audiences, it provides a more nuanced, unbiased analysis of morality and digital game play than is available in the mainstream press or perhaps anywhere else. Like any good

book, it raises as many questions as it answers, pointing the way toward future research. Let us hope that research is as effective as the approach taken by the editors and contributors to this important new text in game studies.

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Brichta, M. K. (2011). *'Love it or loathe it': Audience responses to tabloids in the UK and Germany*. Bielefeld: Transcript. 293 pp.

Tabloids have long been regarded as the outcasts of journalism – sensationalist, brash, dumbed down and therefore not worthy of serious scholarly attention. 'Tabloidization' is often used as a shortcut for everything that is wrong with journalism – it is routinely accused of sensationalism, depoliticizing its readers by feeding them mindless entertainment, of jingoistic coverage of politics, and invading their subjects' privacy. The Leveson inquiry in the UK and the unearthing of the unethical practices of the *News of the World* has done much to confirm these views. Yet for all the criticism leveled against them, tabloids in various parts of the world continue to have a loyal following, a community that uses tabloids to construct what John Hartley referred to as 'media citizenship' – socially marginalized publics that, through media, gain visibility and engage with politics as experienced in their everyday lives.

But if tabloids are 'trash journalism', then it would follow that their audiences would be disregarded as well, or viewed patronizingly as uneducated and uninteresting from an academic point of view. The neglect of audiences of popular media in scholarship is remarked upon by the author of this comparative study of tabloids in the UK and Germany when she refers to the 'mismatch between the traditionally prominent position of the press in media theory, the fact that it still represents an under-researched field', and that where studies of popular news and journalism do exist, these tend to focus on texts rather than audiences (p. 12). She seeks to rectify this situation by taking seriously the way that tabloid audiences relate to these newspapers, how audiences construct their identities in relation to these texts, and how meaning-making is related to the social position of their readers.

By taking tabloids seriously as a topic of study Brichta adds her voice to a slowly growing number of journalism studies scholars that share Barbie Zelizer's (2009, p. 5) observation that tabloidization – much as it continues to be reviled by elite audiences, practitioners and academics – is a process that prompts us to reflect on the dominant assumptions that govern our thinking about journalism in the current globalized media environment.

If academic studies of tabloid audiences are still under-represented, this is even more the case with regards to transnational comparative studies of these audiences of popular media. This study compares tabloid texts and their audiences in two different European countries – the United Kingdom and Germany. It is a rather ambitious project as the qualitative approach requires a detailed exposition of the histories of the respective press institutions, a comparison of the press systems and media cultures. Brichta succeeds in doing this quite well, although one would assume that readers familiar with the respective contexts might be able to add more specific details of relevance to the position of tabloids in their societies.

In her appreciation of the role that popular media can play in society, Brichta of course finds herself firmly in the broadly defined ‘Cultural Studies’ tradition of studying the relationship between media texts and audiences, an influence she duly acknowledges (p. 15). This approach would probably be more familiar to scholars working in British media studies (her predecessors in the study of British tabloids include Colin Sparks, John Tulloch, Mark Pursehouse, Henrik Örnebring, Sofia Johansson and others) than to their German counterparts who she cites as seeming to prefer normative approaches to tabloid media, with a resulting ‘lament’ and ‘discomfort’ (p. 14) about the perceived low quality of tabloid journalism.

Brichta’s brave choice for a transnational comparative approach poses methodological challenges and also requires extensive contextualization in terms of the historical genesis and contemporary social environments of these respective tabloids. She manages both these challenges well. The detailed exposition of the study’s methodology is useful not only to enable a better understanding of the study’s central argument and findings, but may also serve as a resource for further studies or replications of this study in different transnational contexts. Brichta pays attention not only to the histories of these publications themselves, but also to the contrasting histories, laws, markets and professional traditions of the two differing national contexts. In this way, her investigation of the questions at the core of her study – questions of social belonging, nationhood and class – are not treated as abstractions but understood as deeply immersed in the social and cultural specificities of the various contexts of production and consumption.

The understanding (p. 253) that tabloids can provide resources for audiences to make meaning of their everyday lives and engage in the political process, and provide links between the banality of everyday life and larger social and political issues is not a new one. The potential of tabloids to contribute to an understanding of politics has been noted by several authors in the literature. There are places in the study where the existing literature seems to be treated

somewhat deferentially and where one would have liked to see a stronger, more vigorous engagement taking place. However, the study's argument (p. 110) that the social position of readers does not so much produce different *readings* of tabloid media, paves the way for an analysis of the ways in which tabloid media make it possible to construct and take up different social identities. It is in this subtle shift in the study of tabloid newspapers as *constitutive* of social identities, rather than as merely contributing to the social visibility of subaltern identities, that Brichta's study makes an interesting contribution to the existing debates.

One criticism of the book is that it still resembles too closely the PhD thesis on which it was based (Brichta graduated from the Communication and Media Research Institute at the University of Westminster, probably one of the most interesting current spaces in the UK for global media studies). Although the systematic approach and neat divisions in different chapters makes for easy reference, an advantage for scholars wanting to use Brichta's thesis to build on for future research, it does sometimes seem to slow down the pace. Taking some of the literature as read, and attempting a freer flow between different chapters might have made for a more entertaining read.

Overall, this book makes a solid contribution to the expansion of our understandings of how popular media texts relate to their audiences in transnational settings, and lays the foundations for the further comparative work that the field of journalism studies needs – hopefully also extending more of these comparisons to the Global South. Tabloids themselves are a globalized format, and comparative studies may help us understand how those formats are localized according to the dynamics of their readers' social-economic contexts and experiences. Tabloids, for all the criticism that they have attracted, may be instructive manifestations of the dual processes of globalization and localization, as well as the relationship between texts and audiences in transnational contexts.

Reference

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